

**RESEARCH PAPER****Assessing the Progress of Youth Political Participation and its Impact on Democracy: A Case Study of 2024 Elections of Pakistan****¹ Syeda Muzna Ali * ² Munaza Sarwar and ³ Muhammad Usman Ghani**

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***Corresponding Author:** muzna.ali99@gmail.com**ABSTRACT**

This study examines youth political participation in Pakistan, specifically focusing on the 2024 elections. It explores how active youth engagement can enhance democratic consolidation and assesses the level of youth involvement during the elections as compared to previous elections of Pakistan. Targeting Pakistani youth aged 18 to 29, the data was collected from a sample of representative youth voters across different provinces of Pakistan. The survey included questions on voting behavior, political engagement, and perceptions of democracy, with validity ensured through expert review and piloting, and reliability assessed using test-retest methods. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the responses. Key findings reveal a significant increase in youth voter turnout (about 48%) during the 2024 elections, with youth participation extending beyond voting to active involvement in political discourses and campaigns. This trend indicates a positive shift toward a more vibrant and participatory democracy. The study suggests recommendations such as encouraging youth participation and empowering youth through civic education.

KEYWORDS 2024 Elections, Democratic Consolidation, Political Discourse, Youth Engagement, Youth Political Participation, Youth Voter Turnout**Introduction**

Youth is the harbinger of change, bringing innovative ideas and challenging the existing status quo. According to UNDP's National Human Development Survey, Pakistan has the highest proportion of youth. Approximately 64% of the total population is below the age of 30, and 29% is between the ages of 15 and 29 (Bari., 2018). Unfortunately, the youth of Pakistan have never been provided with a platform to showcase their political prowess and express their views. At this point, it is also important to define what youth is. According to the United Nations, youth come in the age bracket of 15–24 years. (Nations, 1981) In Pakistan, the adult franchise age is 18 years. Which was previously 21, but due to the large population consisting of youth, the age was reduced to 18 to ensure maximum participation. But what sort of participation is required on the part of youth to ensure democratic consolidation? Verba and Nie provided a comprehensive explication of political participation, defining it as "activities by private citizens aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel or their actions. Their typology includes various forms of engagement beyond voting and party membership, such as campaign activity, contacting public officials, and cooperative or communal activities". (Kim., 1980)

History reveals that Youth have played a significant role as a galvanizing force against the status quo. Post-Independence, the opposition parties at that time established youth wings to expand their political base and challenge the dominant party's grip on power. In East Pakistan's separatism, Bengali nationalist youth were the key. In 1969, the

youth-led movement against Ayub Khan was supported by key figures such as Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and Sheikh Mujeeb ur Rehman. In 2018, Imran Khan garnered massive support from youth, ushering in an era of modern agenda to end the dynastic politics of the country. (Talbot, 2021). This shows how youth has been considered an important factor in the political discourse and political machinations. Yet, a proper channel or platform for youth political participation is hardly seen.

According to a report by the UN, Youth participation in politics is considerably lower as compared to older citizens. The risks involved with this low participation are challenges to political system representativeness which further leads to disenfranchisement. Studies suggest that youth are more satisfied with democracies as compared to older citizens and this trend is due to the shift in DIO (Do it ourselves) kind of political behavior that exhibits self-expressive characteristics. (Felicetti, 2023). DIO also manifests itself in the form of engagements that are beyond the domain of formal institutional politics, allowing youth to connect to form their community. The example of this small community can be seen in the 2024 General elections when scores of young voters came out to defend their vote and organized talks using various social media platforms (debates on X's space), connecting millions of youth voters from across the country. This level of coherence is indeed an indicator of the consolidation of democracy and rejection of the existing state of affairs by the youth.

Before the 2024 elections, Pakistan's political scene underwent significant shifts, with implications that reverberated throughout society. On May 9, 2023, former Prime Minister Imran Khan was arrested without an arrest warrant at the Islamabad High Court. The charges against him included corruption and other offenses. Khan's supporters took to the streets in protest. These demonstrations escalated into violence, resulting in clashes between Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) supporters and security forces. Lives were lost, and government facilities suffered damage. The government's heavy-handed response – crackdowns, custodial torture, and arrests of journalists and PTI sympathizers – further alienated the populace.

The youth, both overtly and covertly, organized to challenge the prevailing political order. They saw Khan's arrest as an attack on democratic norms and rallied against it. Social media platforms became a battleground for dissent, even as the government restricted internet coverage. The youth's activism was a beacon of hope for change. There were also some controversies related to the Form 45 and 47 post-polls. Form 45 contains the votes received by each candidate at a polling station, signed by the presiding officer. Form 47 compiles unofficial results from all polling stations in a constituency. After the 2024 elections, chaos ensued. Results were delayed, leaving the nation in uncertainty and coalition-building became necessary.

Independent PTI candidates alleged discrepancies between Form 45 and 47 results, claiming that their mandate had been stolen. The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) faced severe criticism for the delay in election results. Legal challenges were filed against the ECP in various courts, demanding justice and alleging election rigging.

The events of 2024 highlighted the resilience of Pakistan's youth. Their active participation challenged the status quo, demanded transparency, and held institutions accountable. While uncertainty loomed, the youth's determination signaled hope for a more vibrant and accountable democracy.

Despite all these challenges, nearly 48% of voters turned out with over 60.6 million Pakistanis exercising their right to vote, demonstrating a strong belief in the democratic process. (FAFEN, 2024) There was apparent anger towards the non-democratic force’s political meddling in the elections. Former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif experienced setbacks while Imran Khan’s PTI saw extreme challenges as his party was banished from partaking in these elections and deprived of their election symbol.

This was a challenging situation for the country as the first time in the history of its elections, a large number of independent candidates contested elections and the country witnessed how people from different walks of life came out to cast votes for independent candidates without knowing anything about their backgrounds. An analysis of the Political Participation of youth in Pakistan’s elections shows a gradual increase in youth participation. In 2018 it was 37%, now it increased to 48% in the 2024 elections (As shown in Figure 1). There were a lot of factors that contributed directly or indirectly to this increase. The Country’s struggle with terrorism, potential bankruptcy, and economic meltdown along with the targeting of popular leaders and questionable judicial decisions, mobilized the youth. The mishandling of protests, the May 9th riots, and subsequent arrests motivated the youth to vote against the status quo. The 2024 elections, seen as a referendum for Pakistan’s future acted as a catalyst that drove young people to the polls.

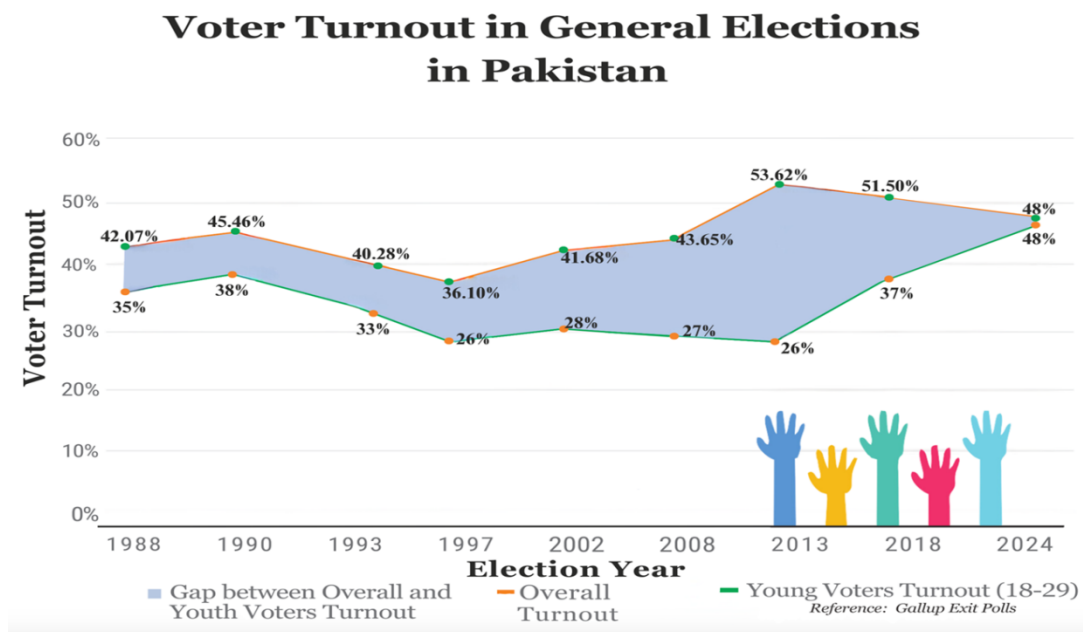


Figure 1: Analysis of Youth voter turnout in Pakistan over the years. Source: PILDAT, March 19, 2024

The political participation of youth in case of Pakistan can be understood from the “Political Engagement theory” of Olsen. Political engagement is defined as:

“Cognitive process when the brain becomes stimulated by external stimuli, in the case related to politics, Elaboration occurs. Elaboration means the connecting of thoughts, recognizing the new information as important and relevant, a process that leads to having an attitudinal reaction.” (Darren, 2024)

Political engagement is a prerequisite for political participation and thus important for the strength and vibrancy of democracy. Research often conflates political

engagement with participation, oversimplifying the cognitive aspect as mere byproducts of partisanship. This assumes an overly optimistic view of citizen engagement, where politics matter so people's participation is taken for granted. However, this neglects the significant portion of citizens who disengage from politics altogether.

Political engagement occurs first as a result of external stimuli that motivates the youth for political participation. In case of 2024 elections, all the factors discussed above, including the instable political condition of the country, abject inflation, unabated corruption, and weak rule of law were the stimuli for political engagement. Youth, acting on the principle of DIO, mobilized using different platforms (Social media), organized talks and political debates and emerged as the major force in challenging the status quo and the non-democratic force's political meddling in the elections.

So can it be stated that Political engagement always leads to democratic consolidation? Well, in the case of Pakistan it definitely set out the path for the future generations as well as set the mood for any elections of the future. This concerted efforts, this level of engagement and participation has positive impacts on the consolidation of democracy as:

A Democracy becomes consolidated- that is it is expected to endure-when citizens especially youth actively participate in politics and prepare for future decision making roles.

Literature Review

The literature on topic of youth political participation has grown significantly in recent years, with numerous studies investigating the Youth engagement in politics and its impact on democracy. Saud explores Pakistani youth's growing Interest in democratic activities, offering a "Youth-inn" idea that highlights the ongoing youth participation in political discourse, using a quantitative method and data collected from KPK and Punjab. The findings conclude that there is a high level of participation among youth and their urge to not join any traditional political party. He further concurs that young people are more active in Pakistan's politics and are critical to Pakistan's political structure. However the study has some limitations as it doesn't talk about youth that is spread all over Pakistan and how it adds to the democratic consolidation of the country. (mashud, 2020)

Furthermore, whether social media has helped Pakistan become more democratic, with a particular emphasis on the political knowledge and consumption habits of young people has been explored by Batool. Using a quantitative survey of seven hundred students from the public universities in Lahore, the study investigates how social media affects political engagement and efficacy. Results show that social media sites like Facebook and Twitter greatly raise young people's political awareness, information sharing, and active engagement. The study concludes that social media enhances democratic processes by encouraging political engagement and awareness among young Pakistanis, based on the theories of uses and pleasure, media richness, and social engagement. However the study has some limitations as it only highlights the use of social media and higher degree of participation due to it instead of revealing about areas where there is no access to internet but still youth participation is significant. (Batool, 2020).

In addition to it, a systematic literature review using 50 articles to identify social factors that prevent people from participating in politics in Pakistan has been done by Mehmood. It highlights major obstacles to Political Participation, including illiteracy,

distrust, oligarchy, inherited politics, lack of interest, and youth disengagement. It explored that political disinterest is a result of historical exploitation and an elite-favoring political system. (Rizvi, 2014)

Moreover, it is important to explore whether youth participation in voluntary activities increase engagement or not. This is addressed by McFarland in his article. Using two longitudinal national datasets, the study applies statistical models to address selection bias, missing data, and clustered replies. The findings show that engagement in extracurricular activities, particularly that involving community service, public speaking, and leadership, significantly increases future political involvement, regardless of socioeconomic status. But it doesn't highlight the need for a political platform for youth as they are often left unrepresented as in the case of Pakistan. (Thomas, 2006)

Previously studies concentrated on increased youth political disengagement in politics of Pakistan. Marie in her article explore why young people in Pakistan are disillusioned with mainstream politics. The main focus of the article was on voices that remain unheard and are mostly not included in political debates in Pakistan. Surprisingly much has changed since this literature. Youth has not only become a driving force but a valuable actor in the political environment of Pakistan. (Lall, 2014)

Sobia Shehzad explores the impact of online social capital on political engagement in Pakistan, utilizing the communication mediation model and PLS-SEM to analyze survey data from 864 respondents. The findings show that extensive internet networks limit online political participation while having little influence on offline political behavior, most likely due to low political trust resulting from historical instability and corruption. The study emphasizes the importance of political expression in increasing involvement and the influence of partisanship. (Umer, 2021).

In addition to it, Murray discusses the challenge of decreased youth engagement in democracy, with an emphasis on Australian citizenship education. It examines the Youth Electoral Study, which discovered that civic education in Australian schools has been only somewhat successful, with many pupils lacking political understanding and faith in politicians. The author underlines the importance of improving school curricula, both official and informal; in order to better involve kids in democratic processes. The findings indicate that attending elections and participating in school-based activities can boost future political participation. The report emphasizes the significance of schools and recommends for dedicated citizenship education courses and more active learning opportunities. (Print, 2010)

Another article investigates the impact of digital media on political participation among Indonesian youth, with a focus on the 2019 student protests against a new corruption law. Using Jürgen Habermas' public domain theory, the quantitative study polled 414 students from four universities. The findings show that digital platforms dramatically improve political participation, with students actively participating in protests and online political discussions. The study indicates that social media and ICTs enable young people to participate in democracy, promote political activism, and contribute to Indonesia's political environment. Recommendations are provided to improve youth engagement through digital channels. (Hendro, 2021).

Methodology

This is a mixed method study.

Population

The targeted respondents for this questionnaire comprised of Pakistani citizens, aged between 18-29 years, registered voters or eligible to vote, residing in different areas of Pakistan and representing diverse educational backgrounds with different political affiliations or none

Sample Size

Respondents were selected using non-probability purposive sampling technique due to the age bracket mentioned above (18-29 years).

Data Collection Technique

Primary data was collected through a questionnaire comprising 20 closed-ended questions.

Instrument Construction

The questionnaire was designed to capture relevant information related to political engagement, voting behavior and perceptions of democracy.

Validity and Reliability

The questionnaire's validity was ensured through expert review and piloting, and reliability assessed using test-retest methods.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data collected via Google Forms was analyzed using thematic analysis method.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical guidelines were followed throughout the study to protect participants' rights and privacy.

Results and Discussions

Pakistani youth under the age bracket of 18-29 years took part in this questionnaire. Total 104 respondents responded to this survey.

Out of these 104 respondents 77.9% stated that they voted in the 2024 elections.

Voted in 2024 Elections

77.9%

Did not Vote in 2024 Elections

22.1%

When asked how important political participation to you is, on a scale of 1 to 5 (where 1 represents not important and 5 represents very important) these were the results:

1 (Not Important)	2	3	4	5 (Very Important)
11 (10.6%)	10 (9.6%)	20 (19.2%)	13 (12.5%)	50 (48.1%)

Surprisingly 48.1% youth think that political participation is necessary. The results show a clear interest of the youth in political participation and the importance of being a part of the system.

The engagement theory of Political participation among youth states that youth engage in politics based on the prevalent factors of the society. In case of Pakistan, a surge in youth political participation could be the result of unemployment, corruption, inflation, instability or awareness as well. So when they were asked about how much satisfied they are with the current state of democracy, on a scale of 1-5 (where 1 shows very dissatisfied and 5 shows satisfied) the results are as followed:

1 (Very Dissatisfied)	2	3	4	5 (Satisfied)
57 (54.8%)	20 (19.2%)	15 (14.4%)	6 (5.8%)	6 (5.8%)

57% of the total 104 youth participants are very dissatisfied with the current state of democracy.

These results clearly indicate that the youth is unsatisfied with the current system and wants to bring a change. Youth of Pakistan challenged the status quo by taking part in the current elections which means that they are unsatisfied with the path of democracy the country is currently taking.

When asked about Elections of 2024, 81.7% responded that the elections were not free and fair.

Free and Fair

18.3%

Not Free and Fair

81.7%

This is a huge setback to Pakistan. Out of its 245 million populations, 60% Pakistani constitutes Youth. And if that 60% is doubtful about the transparency of the elections how can democracy flourish?

Another revelation by the diverse youth population reveals how much youth of Pakistan think that they have a significant role to play in politics:

Significant Role to Play

91.3%

No Significant Role to Play

8.7%

91.3% youth think that they play a significant role. This awareness among the youth of Pakistan is an indication of the changing political scenario of the Country.

When asked about does youth voter turnout significantly impact the election results? The results were as follows:

Impact the results

88.5%

Does not impact the results

11.5%

88.5% Youth believe that their vote significantly impact the results. Despite all the rage about rigging, they believe their vote can put a lot of pressure and has the power to challenge the status quo.

This firm conviction leads us to another question about whether this will impact democracy or not? When it was asked that do you think increased youth political participation will strengthen democracy in Pakistan? These were the results:

Strengthen Democracy

93.3%

Does not Strengthen Democracy

6.7%

A massive 93.3% believe that their participation will help in democratic consolidation of the country.

When asked: in your opinion, what are the primary reasons for political participation? These were the results:

Desire for change

66.3%

Civic duty

18.3%

Interest in specific policy issue

15.4%

This clearly indicates that the major reason to vote among youth is a desire for change (63.3%). This is an indicator of dissatisfaction of youth with the current state of affairs.

When asked how confident are you that youth political participation will lead to positive change in Pakistan? A sliver of hope could be detected in the respondent's answers:

1 (Not confident at all)	2	3	4	5 (Very Confident)
9 (8.7%)	5 (4.8%)	16(15.4%)	22(21.2%)	52 (50%)

This survey concludes the there is an increase in Youth political participation that has a significant impact on the democratic consolidation of the country as the youth has challenged the status quo in these elections by turning out in huge scores and using their political right. The increased political participation is due to a desire for change. This change will have long lasting impacts on the country.

Conclusion

The historic elections of 2024 marked a significant turning point in Pakistan's political landscape. Unlike previous elections, this time scores of independent candidates threw their hats into the ring, reshaping the dynamics and creating an environment of both hope and uncertainty for the nation. For the first time in Pakistan's history, independent candidates emerged as formidable contenders. These individuals, unaffiliated with established political parties, represented a fresh wave of change. Their participation challenged the traditional power structures and offered voters alternative choices beyond party affiliations.

The surge of independent candidates reflected a growing disillusionment with the existing political establishment. People were tired of dynastic politics, corruption, and the status quo. These independent voices promised a departure from the norm, capturing the attention of voters across the country. The election became a battleground against non-democratic forces. Citizens, particularly the youth, rallied against any attempts to manipulate the results. They feared interference from powerful entities that historically meddled in Pakistan's democratic processes.

The vote was not just about selecting representatives; it was a collective stand against political meddling. The ousted Prime Minister, Khan, symbolized this resistance. His voter base, the youth and middle class—had grown weary of the heavy-handed influence of non-democratic actors.

Survey results highlighted the active participation of young voters in the 2024 elections. The youth mobilized to protect their votes, recognizing the significance of their role in shaping the country's future. Their efforts were commendable. By safeguarding the integrity of the electoral process, they sent a clear message: Democracy belongs to the people, not to entrenched elites. The concerted effort by youth had both immediate and lasting effects. In the short term, it ensured a fairer electoral outcome. In the long term, it rejuvenated the democratic spirit. By challenging the old political guard, the youth injected vibrancy into the system. Their activism reminded everyone that democracy thrives when citizens actively engage, question, and hold leaders accountable.

Pakistan has experienced periods of disillusionment due to its withering democratic spirit. However, the youth's mobilization signaled a revival. Their determination to protect their votes breathed new life into the democratic fabric.

As the dust settled after the 2024 elections, the nation stood at a crossroads. The path chosen would determine whether Pakistan could reclaim its democratic fervor or continue down a darker path.

Recommendations

The following suggestions might be made to strengthen democracy even more and guarantee ongoing, energetic political participation:

- First and foremost, it is important to create an atmosphere that supports independent candidates' participation. This can be accomplished by giving independent candidates equal access to campaign resources and streamlining the registration procedure. By doing this, a greater variety of views and viewpoints can be included in the political landscape, diversifying it.
- Second, it is imperative to address the underlying causes of voter disenchantment. Comprehensive changes should be put into place with the intention of lowering corruption and limiting dynastic politics. Rebuilding public confidence in the political system can be facilitated by more open governance procedures and stringent accountability standards for political leaders.
- Third, there is a need to support and underline the importance of youth participation in the democratic process. To educate young people about their rights and obligations in a democracy, civic education programs ought to be implemented in colleges and institutions. Furthermore, establishing forums for young people to participate in political debates and decision-making procedures can guarantee their continuous engagement and input into democratic administration.
- Fourth, more needs to be done to protect the electoral process from outside intervention. Ensuring the integrity of elections and preventing manipulation can be achieved by independent electoral commissions equipped with strong monitoring systems. Laws should be improved to make efforts at interfering with democracy illegal.
- Last but not least, it is crucial to keep up efforts to involve and organize the people, especially through neighborhood associations and grassroots movements. The democratic spirit can be maintained by promoting active citizenry and offering opportunities for civic engagement outside of elections. Town hall gatherings, debates, and public forums can provide as venues for continuing political accountability and discussion.

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